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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 ASMARA 000555

SIPDIS

DEPARTMENT FOR AF/E,
LONDON AND PARIS FOR AFRICA WATCHERS

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TAGS: [EAGR](#) [PGOV](#) [ER](#)

SUBJECT: SKINNY VILLAGERS AND STUNTED CROPS

Classified By: Ambassador Ronald K. McMullen for Reason 1.4 (d)

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: Poor rains left crops in the Eritrean village of Weki (protect) stunted and yielding very little food. The Eritrean government prohibits the villagers from keeping what little crops they've harvested, forcing them to sell their produce only to the government at controlled prices, while allotting them meager rations. Two months into the dry season, people and livestock alike are alarmingly thin and malnourished. Emboff's recent visit to the village provides anecdotal evidence of a looming food emergency in Eritrea. END SUMMARY.

¶2. (C) Emboff traveled to the village of Weki on November 10 to meet villagers and learn how they are coping with poor seasonal rains. Weki has about 1,000 inhabitants, and is located 17 miles north of Asmara, close enough to the capital to avoid the system of checkpoints used to restrict foreigners' travel.

BURNED AND STUNTED CROPS

¶3. (C) The villagers rely almost entirely on farming for food. They grow corn, wheat, barely, potatoes, and a type of bean/pea known as baldonga. The village's fields are in a sweet spot where they usually receive both lowland rains coming from the escarpment, and seasonal rains on Eritrea's highlands. The villagers said neither rain was sufficient this year, resulting in crops' pitiful yields. Emboff noticed that few of the corn stalks had ears (roughly 20%), most of which produced few kernels. The wheat and barley are only about two feet tall; potatoes were marble-sized, at best. The only bright spot was the baQdQnga grown inate beans.

SKINNY COWS, SCROUNGING CHICKENS, AND DYING DOGS

¶4. (C) The villagers also raise some cattle, goats, chickens, and sheep for eggs, meat, and milk. Poor rains resulted in insufficient grass growth, inadequate to last through the long dry season. A villager told Emboff that one of his cows recently died of hunger, while another became so thin that he sold the cow for \$270 before it died (a loss of \$200 from the purchase price). Five of another family's ten sheep died recently of an unknown affliction. Several listless, malnourished dogs appeared to be bordering on death. Four scrawny chickens fearlessly hunted for discarded food among many kicking feet while Emboff sat speaking to the villagers.

ALL WORK, NO CASH

¶5. (C) A woman in the village told Emboff that she was employed in the GSE's &cash for work8 program in 2006. The GSE funded the program by monetizing food aid seized in 2006

from USAID, the European Commission, and the World Food Program. The woman said she performed manual labor for several months in 2006, but never received compensation. Both the woman and some other villagers expressed deep dissatisfaction with the GSE, bordering on hatred, and doubted the government could provide them with adequate food.

EXPROPRIATED HARVEST, MEAGER RATIONS, AND CHECKPOINTS

¶6. (C) The Eritrean government requires the villagers to sell all harvested crops to government purchasers, and does not allow them to keep crops for themselves. The GSE assigns a manager to enforce this requirement. People from the village sometimes sneak into the fields at night to harvest a bit of food for their families to supplement the GSE's meager rations. One family of four reported receiving only 20 pounds of sorghum for an entire month, adequate for only one week. The family ate only once per day, right before bed; otherwise, they would be too hungry to fall asleep.

¶7. (C) To combat illegal transfers of food in Eritrea, the GSE instituted several customs checkpoints on roads leading into Asmara. The soldiers at these checkpoints only stop vehicles coming into Asmara, and are said to confiscate as little as two pounds of raw wheat or flour.

MISSING MEN

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¶8. (C) Although Weki has 1,000 residents, few young men were present. The few there wore military uniforms and were working in the fields. Villagers said soldiers from the village often overstay their one-week furloughs by as much as two months to help work in the fields. If the soldiers return to their units within two months (and are not caught in the meantime), the GSE only penalizes them their meager pay rather than administering harsher punishment. Many young men are evading mandatory national service by living with relatives in Asmara, where they look for work to help support their families in the village. Other young men from the village fled to Sudan.

MALNUTRITION

¶9. (C) Emboff noticed that all of the village's inhabitants were extraordinarily skinny. When greeting them, Emboff felt protruding vertebrae and scapulae. Many of the villagers had shrunken cheeks, and the children seemed unusually small for their age. Emboff noted one seven year-old girl only the size of a three- or four-year-old child.

¶10. (C) COMMENT: This eye-witness account of Weki tracks with other post information about Eritrean villages beyond Asmara's military checkpoints. Despite their professed deep dislike of GSE economic policies, the Weki villagers' focus on daily survival leaves them little time or energy for stronger expressions of their discontent. END COMMENT.
MCMULLEN